TWO VIEWS TWO PLACES

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In Certain Places
UCLan
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In Certain Places, West Cumbria

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Views of Keswick and Derwentwater.

The Lake District and West Cumbria

It is possible to find one of the most spectacular illustrations of the relationship between the Lake District and West Cumbria in the view that can be found by looking through and under the span of Greta Bridge on the A66 bypass at Keswick. It is a perspective that would not have existed were it not for West Cumbria — the ugly, dirty, industrial and polluting other half of the Cumbria most people knew of as the Lake District.

To stop in Keswick and take up the vantage point of this view is to see something like a life-size and living diorama that reveals the multiple temporal layers of the Cumbrian landscape.

In the far distance are the celebrated forms and peaks of the North Western Fells, the remains of geological forces that shaped the landscape millions of years ago, which lie to the south and west of Derwentwater (and falling within the loop of the River Derwent); closer yet is the managed landscape of trees and houses amongst which the Lakes Poets, would, for a time, find a home and meeting place at Greta Hall (Robert Southey occupied the house for four decades until his death in 1843, sharing it with Coleridge for a few years at the turn of the century), during which time they would help to forge a new consciousness that would, in turn, produce such a thing as the idea of a 'National Park.' Finally, in the foreground is the concrete brutality of the 20th century road and bridge, passage to the industrial west and the coast.

In the late 1960s, the main road that passed through the Lake District at Keswick was the A594, which occupied most of the route of today's A66 (it went as far as Cockermouth, with the A595 and then A597 continuing to Workington). Two sections of the road were essentially built on top of old railway lines: the Cockermouth & Workington Railway (1847-1966) and the Cockermouth, Keswick and Penrith Railway (1864-1966). Today, the most visible remnant of the railway era is Bassenthwaite Lake Station, which has been transformed into a tourist attraction.

The road to the west coast had had been one of a number of old 'trunk routes' that were scheduled to be upgraded at the end of the 1960s to accommodate greater and faster flows of traffic as the number of vehicles using the nation's roads increased. As far as the planned improvements to create the A66 west of Penrith were concerned, in principle it should not have been so easy to impose this modernist vision in such a celebrated landscape, which was protected from developments that might alter its character by its National Park status (awarded in 1951).

The main justification for extending the A66 was to save the port towns in West Cumbria, the subject of this guide, which had been left shattered by a wave of de-industrialisation that hit Britain in the mid-to-late 1960s. At the close of a public inquiry into the planned road in 1972, when the UK government did battle with objectors, it was argued that this structure would, in the end, make a positive contribution to the aesthetic appreciation of the Lake District. Today it bears a plaque that was unveiled in 1999 recording the fact that it had been voted Britain's Best Concrete Engineering Structure of the 20th Century.
But, as alien or unwelcome presences in a venerated landscape, the road and bridge, might then be regarded as outgrowths of West Cumbria as much as they represent access points to Keswick and Derwentwater and its surrounding landscape and attractions.

Views of Workington and the area around the shore.

Workington Shore

The A66 ends at Workington at a set of traffic lights, beyond which lies a pedestrianised shopping area, whose point of entry is marked by a steel sculpture of railway tracks fashioned into a Doric column. This work, titled 'Curwen's Column' — after John Christian Curwen, MP for the town in the late 18th and early 19th century — reflects the history of this place, which made railway tracks that went all around the world.

Moving out to the shore we find a strange and fascinating landscape — once identifiable as Chapel Bank — which is found behind the railway station and where a real sense of West Cumbria's geographic position can be obtained. Here, the River Derwent flows out past docks and port into the sea, having already passed through Derwentwater, Bassenthwaite and Cockermouth. Over and across the Irish Sea and the Solway Firth flowed the economic and cultural connections that helped to forge modern West Cumbria. The sea-facing towns of the Cumbrian peninsula formed part of what Halford Mackinder (one of the founders of the discipline of geography) once referred to as a 'British Mediterranean.' What he meant was that its economy and culture were products of maritime trade with Scotland, Ireland and other places on what Mackinder also called 'Britain's Inland Sea.'

Workington might otherwise not seem to be a coastal town, but it is. Here was found a mine that extended under the sea, until it was flooded in an 1837 disaster. For most of the 20th century steel works and railway lines ran right up to the edge of the land. Along the banks of the river there can be found numerous locational markers, intended as aids to vessels as they navigate the narrow channel into port during changing tidal conditions. For the non-seafaring visitor, though, they have something of the quality of abstract sculptures that have been left dotted around the landscape. This area, which is on the opposite side of the Derwent from the working port of today, has been redesigned to be accessible to walkers — there are pathways and benches around the well-hidden Workington marina, and views back towards the town and a section of quayside homes and in the distance, over the fells in the distance, lies Derwentwater. Further out towards the edge of the landscape is a structure that looks like a displaced watchtower from Checkpoint Charlie in Cold War Berlin, the end of the C2C, coast to coast / sea to sea, cycle route.

One of the main attractions of this area is the hill that rises up from the car park, which is known as St. Michael's Mount or How Michael, and offers a view of the coastline of West Cumbria, from Maryport to St Bees Head. The area was subject to investigations by R. G. Collingwood, an Oxford philosopher and historian (whose father W. G. Collingwood, helped to design the Ruskin monument at Friars Crag, Derwentwater), who traced the positions of Roman signal stations along the Cumbrian coast. Writing in 1928, Collingwood described St. Michael's Mount as 'an admirable place of outlook, and one which would inevitably be used in any scheme of coastal watch-towers.' At that time, he noted that on top of the hill stood a medieval pele-tower, which had possible been built on top of the old Roman signal station. Today, neither can be seen and may have collapsed into the sea as a result of quarrying activity beneath the hill — a reminder, if needed, that this was a landscape that has undergone many changes.

Further Information

John Scanlan is a cultural historian, theorist and practitioner with an interdisciplinary academic background.

Since joining UCLan in 2017, John's academic research has been focused primarily on West Cumbria and explores how we might understand its unique place characteristics. This work has included some publications whose intended audience is more specialist and academic, and others that are aimed at a broader audience who may be interested in discovering West Cumbria. In addition to the research element of his work, John is also involved in a range of partnership working, undertaking collaborative actions that are aimed at engendering cultural and arts-led initiatives that are focused on place development in West Cumbria.

In Certain Places is a curatorial partnership led by Professor Charles Quick and Elaine Speight. It is based in the School of Art and Media at the University of Central Lancashire.

Established in 2003, it seeks to generate new and creative ways of inhabiting and informing the future of places through an ongoing programme of artistic interventions. Interdisciplinary in nature, and spanning a range of art forms, its work includes temporary public art works and architectural commissions, artist residency and research projects, and public talks, discussions and events.

Collectively these activities generate new understandings of the urban environment, enable new ideas to be tested in public spaces and instigate ongoing collaborations between artists, academics, urban planners, activists, public institutions, businesses and other individuals and communities in the places it works and beyond.

Steel Works
Reservoir
Low Perch
Perch
Perch
Tide Light
(Red Fixed)
PIER
LONSDALE DOCK
Lowther Iron Works
JOHN PIER
Tide Light
(White Fixed)
H.W.M.O.T.
Pier
Tide Ball
Watch House
Rocket Apparatus Station
Shipbuilding Yard
Jetty
Jetty
OLD DOCK
Main Pier
Lifeboat House
Post
Custom Ho.
Isabella Pit
(Disused)
Mud
Merchants' Quay
Ship Inn
Shore House
HARBOUR
Mud
SOUTH QUAY
Iron Works
Br. & Boiler Works
Schs.
Sta.
Findlay Place
MINERAL RAILWAY
Engine Shed
Chapel Hill
St. Michael's Mount
HARBOUR RAILWAY
Patterson Hill
Clay Flatts
Chapel Bank
Meth. Chap.
Gasometers
School House
Old Pottery
NEW YARD
Annie Pit Lane
Newyard Iron Works
Reservoir
L.&N.W.R.
WHITEHAVEN JUNCTION
Buddle Pit
(Disused)
Derwent Iron & Steel Works

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